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ALEXANDER CALDER

LOUISE NEVELSON

DAVID SMITH

Alexander Calder, Louise Nevelson, and David Smith, three of the most celebrated American sculptors have in common a technique of building up sculpture as opposed to chipping away at materials to achieve a desired form.

The work of Alexander Calder, born in 1898, is appealing for its spontaneity, playfulness, color and wit. Although born into a family of sculptors in Lawton, Pennsylvania, young Calder's first training was for a career in engineering. He sees himself as a blend of workman and creator.

In 1926, like many American artists and writers of his generation, Calder moved to Paris. He experimented with wire sculpture and animated toys. This experimentation blossomed into The Circus, an entertainment which includes 55 moveable acrobats and animals. (It is on display at the Whitney uptown.)

Wire Sculpture, 1928, is from The Circus. Another early work is the Double Cat, 1930. Pistil, 1931, a wire flower-formed sculpture anticipates his later work in which organic nature is translated into mechanics.

While in France, Calder adopted Mondrian's use of the primary colors, yellow, red and blue, as well as black and white. On viewing Mondrian's rectangles, Calder remarked that they should "vibrate and oscillate." Calder then went to his own studio and began what grew into his major invention, the mobile -- cut and assembled steel sheets suspended in air. Mobiles in this show are Seascape, 1948, Big Red, 1959, and Indian Feathers, 1969. He also began designing large stationary works called stabiles, such as Cock's Comb, 1960, on the terrace.

Calder lives and works in Roxbury, Connecticut. He also maintains residences in France. His latest venture, a logical extension of his preoccupation with forms moving in space, is painting commercial jet planes for Braniff Airlines.

Louise Nevelson is probably the most renowned woman sculptor of our time. Born in Russia, Nevelson immigrated to Maine as a young child and began training in all the arts at an early age. Despite a sure sense of her own talent throughout her life, she was completely unrecognized until 1951 when she exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art.

Nevelson has always experimented with configurations of objects chosen from everyday life. She is interested in these pieces for their form, not their function, and it has been said that she has an "obsession for packaging." Architectural moldings, spindles, and various remnants and discards are nailed into open boxes and stacked against a wall to form Royal Tide II, 1961-63. Rain Forest Columns, 1962-67, is a sculptural ensemble resembling totem poles, whose mysterious presence is heightened by the blue lighting specified by the artist. The wooden Black Majesty, 1955, has the aura of some ancient ritual object. Her later plexiglass works like Transparent Sculpture, 1967-68, are made of a few simple shapes screwed and bolted together in a complex modular array.

Nevelson does not distinguish between her work and her life. She works where she lives, in any room, and her walls are sculpture in progress. Last year Nevelson donated a large 4½ ton steel sculpture as a gift to the city of New York. It is now located on Park Avenue at 94th Street.

David Smith, 1906-1965, was a master of welded sculpture; his strong statements in steel have had a major influence on contemporary sculptors. Smith, born in Indiana, began his artistic career as an abstract painter, but earned money as a welder of locomotive and automobile engines.



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Lectern Sentinel, 1961, has the qualities of a tall, graceful but at the same time heroic human figure. The overlapping steel plates give an illusion of depth to this relatively flat sculpture. Smith carefully burnished the surfaces to introduce a play of highlights which create an added sense of depth and movement. The Cock Fight Variation, 1945, is an early example of Smith's use of a cutting torch on steel almost as a drawing instrument. Hudson River Landscape, 1951, a linear, airy piece is an example of Smith's "drawings in space."

All the pieces in this exhibition are from the permanent collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art at 75th Street and Madison Avenue.

